

Officer Testifies of Her Two Sexual Assaults in the Army

By LYNETTE CLEMETSON

WASHINGTON, March 31 — For the first time since the Department of Defense ordered a senior-level investigation into reports of sexual assaults against servicewomen stationed in the Central Command area surrounding Iraq, an officer who said she had been sexually abused told her story on Wednesday at an open hearing before Congress.

The officer, Capt. Jennifer Machmer of the Army, testified at a crowded Capitol Hill hearing that she had faced two sexual assaults and a spoken sexual intimidation since going on active duty in September 2000. The most recent assault took place in Kuwait last March, Captain Machmer said, less than a month after she was deployed to Iraq.

Because of the abuse and what Captain Machmer characterized as the military's repeatedly dismissive

response to her complaints, "my future has been put on hold and is still on hold," she told the panel, convened by the Congressional Women's Caucus.

In addition to Captain Machmer's testimony, written statements from several other military women who had been sexually abused were submitted at the hearing. They included that of an Army Reserve major who said she had been raped last March by a fellow soldier in a women's latrine during a missile attack alert and a sergeant who said she had been raped in Afghanistan last spring by an officer serving in the forces of another country.

"If we do not address this problem here and now, I predict the Pentagon will witness a growing exodus of women in uniform, and growing problems in filling the critical positions they occupy," said Representative Louise M. Slaughter, co-chair-

woman of the bipartisan caucus.

The Congressional panel also heard testimony from people who are providing assistance to soldiers who have been sexually abused and from Anita K. Blair, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for personnel programs.

"Sexual assault is criminal conduct and will not be tolerated in the Department of Defense," Ms. Blair said. The Pentagon group investigating sexual abuse, which began work in mid-February, is to issue its findings by April 30.

Over roughly the past 18 months there have been 112 reports of sexual misconduct by members of the United States military in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Bahrain.

Other recent reports of widespread abuse in the military, including reports of two dozen sexual assaults at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas in 2002, were referred to re-

peatedly at the hearing as examples of long-running, systematic problems in responding to the issue.

Witnesses testified to the need for a number of services, including expanded mental health and trauma counseling and better medical care.

A central theme was the need for confidentiality for victims. Advocates said that victims in the military, even more than civilian victims of assault, were reluctant to report abuse for fear of being isolated within their units and hindering their chances for advancement.

Captain Machmer, who is being medically discharged as a result of her abuse, said the cumulative effect of the lack of support was a lack of trust in the military system.

"It's sad to say," she said in an interview after the hearing. "But I trusted the Iraqis more than I trusted some of the people I worked with."